

Common Ground



This document shares our thinking on some of the key wildlife issues in west central Montana. Using your input, we strive to make wildlife management decisions in our 2014-2015 hunting season setting process that:

- Address wildlife distribution across public and private lands
- Reduce predation rates to moderate levels
- Address hunter distribution across public and private lands
- Reduce wildlife damage on private land
- Address local situations rather than applying “one-size-fits-all” solutions

We share common ground that we all want positive change. Our question to you is: Are we headed in the right direction?

Read the backstory in this document. Then turn to the last page to learn how you can review the hunting season proposals for 2014-15 and share your ideas for improvement. Make sure you send us your comments by 5:00 P.M. on January 24.

Over the past decade, Montana has been challenged by unprecedented changes in wildlife populations and their habitats, such as the growth of large carnivore populations, declines in ungulate survival and increasing habituation of deer and elk to subdivisions and agriculture. Biologists have responded with new approaches in habitat conservation and management, hunting seasons, research and communication to strike a balance that includes the hunter, the trapper, and the nonhunting or nontrapping recreationist alike. There have been bright spots, like last spring's increased elk counts and calf survival in the East and West Forks of the Bitterroot, and there have been losses—the collapse of the Burdette Creek elk herd in Mineral County, and an EHD outbreak centered in the western Missoula Valley that killed hundreds of white-tailed deer this summer. Much is left to be done.



Region 2 covers 10,500 square miles in West-Central Montana, one of seven FWP administrative regions in the state. The regional office is located in Missoula at 3201 Spurgin Road, 406-542-5500, fwp.mt.gov

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First goal: Address wildlife distribution across public & private lands

Region 2 biologists, wardens, and hunter access staff are focused on correcting a decline in elk and deer numbers on public land across much of the region—and addressing increasing damage caused by wildlife on private land. We are also focused on managing wildlife with a better eye for local variations across the region—one size does not fit all.

Annual elk counts in Region 2 reached a record high in 2013, while numbers of elk declined on Forest Service, BLM, DNRC and publicly accessible private lands (e.g., Plum Creek & TNC) across much of Region 2. Elk on less accessible private lands continue to increase in many areas.

23, 158

Regional elk count in Spring 2013

22%

Increase in regional elk count since 2004

32%

Estimated Increase in elk on private lands since 2004

9%

Estimated Decrease in elk available to hunters on public and open private lands since 2004

In 2004, Region 2 biologists estimated the percentage of the elk in their Hunting Districts that were inaccessible to the public during hunting season. In 2013, they repeated that exercise. By weighting the percentages by the corresponding elk counts in 2004 and 2013, they painted a picture of Region 2 that guides FWP's hunting season proposals for 2014-2015.

The sequence of events that leads to shifts of elk and deer from public land to private has been well documented over decades. Elk radioed in the 1980s in the Chamberlain Creek study area, east of Missoula, were more inclined to use lower elevations at the end of dry summers. Also in the 1980s, FWP noted that hunting traffic on open Forest Service roads spurred the shift in September and October at Gold Creek, east of Drummond. Elk that discovered irrigated alfalfa fields in the bottoms benefitted from better nutrition, and to this day biologists have noted higher rates of calf survival among elk on some private lands than on the National Forest. Add the protection afforded by some landowners during the hunting season, and the shift in deer and elk distribution is further fostered.

Second goal: Reduce predation rates to moderate levels

The recovery of the gray wolf and increasing densities of mountain lions—and, locally, black bears and grizzly bears—have accelerated the disparity between public and private lands, from an elk and deer's point of view. As long ago as the 1970s, Idaho researchers documented that mule deer shifted their distribution in response to lion predation patterns in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, and more recent research in Southwest Montana documented fine-scale shifts in elk distribution with respect to wolf activity. In addition, elk and deer survival rates may be higher on private lands where large carnivores are sometimes controlled and where open habitat is a disadvantage for lions and bears.

FWP, the Commission and an involved public have undertaken a hands-on effort to strike a sustainable ecological and social balance among habitat, carnivores and prey. First steps, taken in recent years and proposed for continuation in 2014-15, were to decrease mortality from all sources in elk and deer populations and to moderate carnivore densities toward long-term sustainable levels. Biologists look for elk and deer to increase across much, but not all, of their affected range, and they expect to manage for higher elk and deer densities where possible to better assimilate predation and support hunting opportunities for all game species.

Third Goal: Address hunter distribution across public and private lands

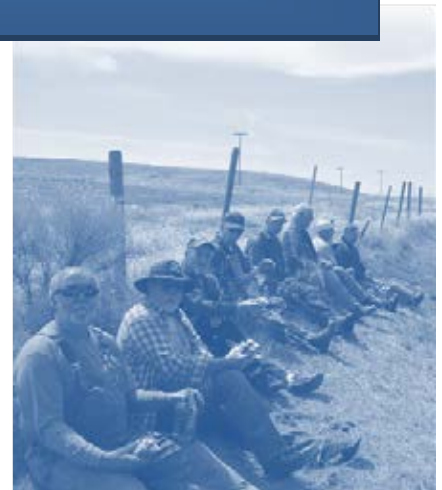
On top of habitat and predation factors, FWP expanded opportunities for hunters to harvest antlerless elk and deer, particularly in 2004-2008, to match their overall abundance and to decrease some populations toward their objectives in the Montana Elk Management Plan. Hunters took advantage of these opportunities where they could find access—often on their public lands. In West-Central Montana, FWP and hunters have long valued the opportunity to hunt their public lands with minimal restrictions, knowing that elk and deer populations would rebound from the occasional overharvest or hard winter. Now it is clear that change is needed to maintain a hunting legacy that includes public land.

Region 2 proposes to help redistribute wildlife across private and public lands , in part by redistributing hunting pressure and harvest more evenly. The structure of current hunting regulations passively directs hunting pressure toward public land and discourages some landowners from opening their private lands to hunting. With good ideas from the public, FWP proposes to try some new approaches for matching hunting pressure with wildlife abundance.

Fourth Goal: Reduce wildlife damage on private land

FWP and all wildlife enthusiasts owe a debt of gratitude to the landowners who provide wildlife habitat on their private lands, often at significant personal expense. And many landowners in Region 2 welcome public hunters on their properties as part of their management plans. Region 2 believes that private landowners might continue to allow hunting, or would open their lands to more public hunters,

- If more people had the opportunity to draw antlerless licenses valid on private lands.
- If hunters on public lands and roadways weren't poised on the property boundaries to kill any elk or deer that cross.
- If having hunters did not unduly intrude on the landowners' privacy and enjoyment of their property.
- If landowners felt they could trust hunters to act responsibly.



Sportsmen taking a lunch break during a wildlife-friendly fence project that was arranged by Region 2 Block Management staff on private land, near Deer Lodge.

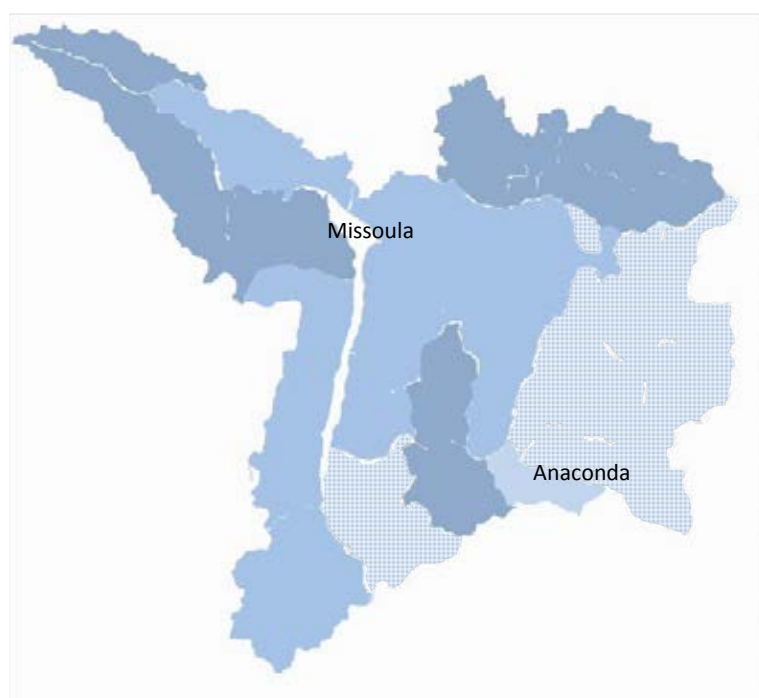
Block Management and other FWP private lands hunting access programs are part of the answer, but are far from being the entire solution. Montana's Hunter and Bowhunter Education programs are crucial for instilling hunter ethics in youth and adults new to hunting. Increasingly we see that these programs could be better supported with hunting regulations that put hunters in better positions to meet landowners' needs as well as their own, and to enjoy satisfying experiences in the outdoors.

Fifth Goal: Address local situations rather than applying "one-size-fits-all" solutions

Wildlife abundance is unique to every creek and mountain top. It varies from ranch to ranch and from year to year. When combined, larger geographic patterns emerge. Although a knowledge of broad patterns is useful, management needs to be sensitive to local circumstances. No one size fits all.

Generally speaking, elk populations are in decline or at relatively low levels on public and private land in hunting districts along Montana's border with Idaho, and abutting the Bob Marshall and Scapegoat Wilderness Areas. And, generally speaking, elk counts are higher than in 2004 on both public and private

lands in the ranchlands and isolated mountain ranges in the eastern part of the region. We see more variation in wildlife populations in the heart of the region, where landscape diversity is highest.



Dark Blue	Elk numbers generally down on both public and private
Medium Blue	Elk numbers generally down on public, but up on private
Light Blue	Elk numbers generally up on both public and private

To address wildlife distribution across public & private lands, we propose:

- A new hunting district (HDs 262) and portions of districts (areas outside the Forest boundary in HD 240 and on private lands only in many districts) proposed to focus antlerless harvest on problem areas and reduce incidental harvest of antlerless deer and elk that are not causing damage.
- Elk hunting by limited permit in HD 250, a portion of HD 212 (near Drummond), and on Spotted Dog Wildlife Management Area in HD 215.
- Bull elk hunting by unlimited permit in HDs 202, 203, 240, 261 and 270.
- No youth or archery opportunity to hunt cow elk on the general license in HDs 200, 202, 203, 250 and 285.
- Low or no licenses for antlerless elk and deer on public land in the Lower Clark Fork, Bitterroot and Blackfoot.

- Reduction of the 5-week season for either-sex white-tailed deer in the Bitterroot districts to the first 9 days. Bucks-only for the rest of the season.

To reduce predation rates to moderate levels, we propose:

- Continued regional management support for statewide wolf hunting and trapping.
- Lengthened spring black bear seasons proposed or maintained across Region 2.
- Regulations to achieve a 30% reduction in mountain lions over a 3-year period across most of Region 2. (Dec. 2013 will begin the second lion hunting season under that prescription.)
- Continued research to inform management of lion densities in the Bitterroot and Philipsburg areas.

To address hunter distribution across public and private lands, we propose:


- Expanded numbers of antlerless licenses for elk and deer, valid only on private land or outside the National Forest boundary. The idea is to offer enough antlerless licenses for every hunter who can build a relationship with a private landowner, or whom a landowner already knows and trusts.
- Reduced hunting opportunities for antlerless elk and deer on public land in many parts of the region.

To reduce wildlife damage on private land, we propose:

- Improved odds of drawing an antlerless license for elk and deer on private land.
- Increased B-licenses for antlerless elk on public lands where populations are above objective and contribute to damage on private lands.
- Efforts by FWP to help hunters and landowners connect with each other.

To address local situations, we propose:

- New regulations in the northwest portion of HD 212 to address an elk issue, near Drummond.
- The division of HD 260 (the Bitterroot-Clark Fork river bottom) into two HDs to separately address the effects of EHD (epizootic hemorrhagic disease) in the valley west of Missoula (new HD 206).
- Boundary changes for HDs 240, 250 & 270 using elk research findings to address enforcement issues.
- The addition of antlerless B licenses for white-tailed deer in HD 290 where damage occurs locally.
- A conversation on regulations to address incidents of illegal and unethical elk hunting in HD 270.

A photograph of a herd of elk standing in a grassy field. The elk are of various ages and are looking in different directions. The background is a hazy, open landscape.

It is our intent that every proposal for 2014-15 should contribute to growing wildlife where wildlife can live, reducing or redistributing wildlife where wildlife cause damage, and—in the long view—restoring and improving hunting and all opportunities to appreciate wildlife in the future.

First Signs of Success

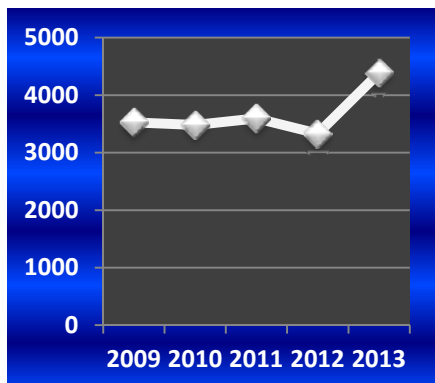
We began this season-setting process in earnest in August of this year when FWP began scoping the public for issues, and a challenge emerged from those early scoping sessions: Were we doing everything that is necessary and productive to safeguard our wildlife and our hunting heritage for future generations?

This challenge hit home. Figuratively, if not literally, we set aside last year's hunting regulations and started, more or less, from a blank piece of paper. We mined our biological data and assessed where and in what magnitude a harvestable surplus existed across our hunting districts, and from that we proposed a particular harvest. And, we tried to face up to facts where a surplus does not appear to exist at this time, and needs to be grown.

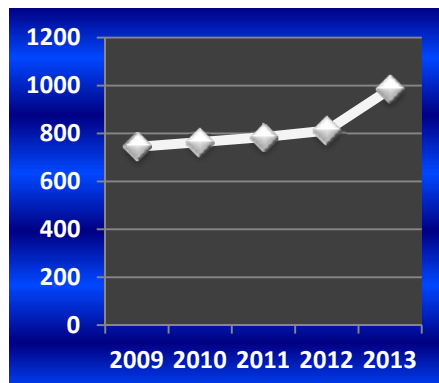
Once again following the lead of cooperating landowners and hunters, we also invested a lot of effort in developing some new solutions—we'll see—to some very old problems that have been getting worse. We understand that doing the same things that we've been doing will not only fail to solve the problem, but that it might actually make things worse.

We want people to know that we have taken the trust that you place in us very seriously, and we've worked hard to get to this point, but that does not mean that we've hit the nail on the head by any means. We look forward to hearing from you now, and to learning the things you can tell us that will get us where we all want to go. We have a great, participatory process here in Montana, and that's the secret ingredient that makes us strong and our resources as well conserved as they are. We're looking forward to those moments when someone presents the missing puzzle piece that turns a rough proposal into gold, or derails one that lacked all of the facts.

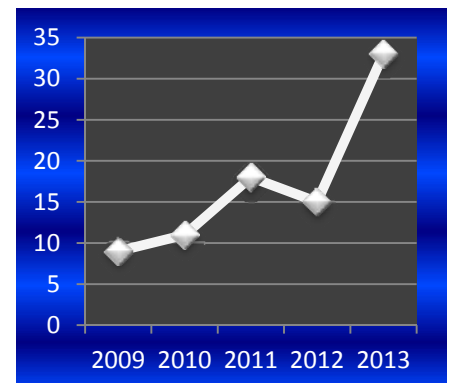
We've had some early successes emerging from the serious sacrifices that deer, elk and lion hunters, among others, have made in recent years to help strike a balance between large carnivores and their prey in western Montana. We've seen a bump in elk counts and calf survival in the Bitterroot, and while it is too early to declare victory, there is reason for optimism at this time. Our collaborative efforts as an agency and a public seem to be preventing the disaster that we appeared to be headed for in 2009, and balance does seem to be a realistic possibility in many places, if not everywhere.



East Fork Elk Trend (HD 270)



West Fork Elk Trend (HD 250)



West Fork Calf: Cow Ratio

Engage --in the hunting season-setting process

December 12, 2013	Fish and Wildlife Commission hears FWP proposals for the 2014-2015 hunting seasons and hears public comment—then releases tentative proposals for deer, elk, antelope, moose, sheep, goat and bear for public review.
January, 2014	FWP Region 2 holds public meetings in Superior, Hamilton, Darby, Potomac, Seeley Lake, Helmville, Lincoln, Drummond, Philipsburg, Anaconda, Deer Lodge and Missoula. Public also may comment online at fwp.mt.gov
February 2014	F&W Commission considers public input and FWP adjustments made in response to public comment—then adopts the hunting regulations for deer, elk, antelope, moose, sheep, goat and bear for 2014-2015.
April –June 2014	F&W Commission reviews, hears public comment and adopts lion quotas.
May-July 2014	F&W Commission reviews, hears public comment and adopts wolf seasons.



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Headed Your Way

FWP invites you to join us in your hometown in January to discuss hunting season proposals for 2014 & 2015.

Go to fwp.mt.gov to review proposals and submit comments.

Public Meeting Dates in Region 2

- Helmville— 1/6, Community Center, 6:30 P.M.
- Hamilton— 1/7, Bitterroot River Inn, 6:30 P.M.
- Superior-- 1/8, High School, 6:30 P.M.
- Drummond—1/9, Community Center, 6:30 P.M.
- Philipsburg—1/13, Granite Co.Museum, 6:30 P.M.
- Seeley Lake—1/14, Community Hall, 6:30 P.M.
- Anaconda-- 1/15, Lee Metcalf Senior Center, 6:30 P.M.
- Lincoln-- 1/16, Lambkins Restaurant, 6:30 P.M.
- Darby-- 1/20, Elem. School, 6:30 P.M.
- Missoula-- 1/21, Double Tree Hotel, 6:30 P.M.
- Deer Lodge--1/22, Community Center, 6:30 P.M.
- Potomac-- 1/23, Community Center, 6:30 P.M.

Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission

The Commission:

- is your avenue to the decision-making process.
- weighs FWP's recommendations along with public input to make decisions for the good of fish and wildlife.
- is comprised of five members, appointed by the Governor, each representing one or more FWP regions.

Gary Wolfe, of Missoula, is your Commissioner representing FWP Regions 1 & 2. Commissioner Wolfe may be reached at 406-493-9189 or gwolfe207@bresnan.net

